

The Robert Trent Jones Trail:

Field Of Dreams

by Joe McLean, FGM Editorial Assistant

In the movie “Field of Dreams” based on the book Shoeless Joe by W. P. Kinsella, an Iowa farmer walking in his cornfield hears a whispering voice, “If you build it, he will come”.

Maybe a little far-fetched?

Dr. David G. Bronner, the CEO of the Retirement Systems of Alabama, would have to disagree. Dr. Bronner had a vision of creating a golf trail that would bring new industry and expand tourism to the State. At the same time this golf industry would provide employment and improve the lives of residents of Alabama.

Robert Trent Jones, Sr. and later his protégé Roger Rulewich bought into the vision and their 26 world-class designed golf courses with 468 holes of championship golf found on 11 different sites are a testament to the power of dreams.

And come they have.

Celebrating 20 years of world-class golf in 2012, the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail is on track to have its 10 millionth visitor this year.

This writer had the privilege of playing five of the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail Courses last fall along with a group of golf writers and the experience far exceeded my expectations.

After a sampling of delicious chicken & ribs and a slice of pecan pie at the Dreamland BBQ Restaurant, a short and well-needed stroll brought us back to the luxurious Renaissance Hotel in Montgomery. After an early morning wake-up call and a delicious breakfast we were off to our first RTJ Golf Trail experience. The Robert Trent Jones Golf Course at Capitol Hill in Prattville,





Ross Bridge, 9th fairway



Capitol Hill - Legislator, Hole #2

home to three magnificent courses - Legislator, Senator and Judge awaited us with our morning game scheduled on the Senator Course.

Fairways are always good to hit on any golf course, but especially so on the Senator Course that is void of any trees. It was a good thing that we were playing on a day without any wind for the Senator Course is as links-like as you're going to get. Fairways on the course are separated by strategic mounding complexes up to 40 feet in height. Keep your ball out of the grass on these mounds or in some cases the only way you will find it will be by the feel of your foot pushing it further into the depths of the grass.

So, it sounds like a lot of doom and gloom. Not so.

Home of the LPGA Navistar Classic won by 16-year-old Alexis "Lexi" Thompson in 2011, the Senator Course provides a challenging test of golf for both amateurs and professionals alike. Although the fairways appear to be a little narrow, if you have picked the right tee from the five to choose from for your game you will find an abundance of landing area waiting to receive your tee shot.

Typical of most of the holes on the course is the par 4 first measuring between 281 and 427 yards. What you see is what you get. There's no puzzle here. Pick your target on the meandering fairway, trust your swing, let your ball fly and hope that your warm-up was fruitful. Make sure you pick the correct flag on holes 3 and 7 as they share a double green, reminiscent of the Old Course at St. Andrews.

The Senator Course was thoroughly enjoyable to play and a great introduction to the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail.

After a quick lunch, we teed off for nine holes on the Legislator Course at Capitol Hill. Playing through full-growth pine trees and along a picturesque bluff, the Legislator gives a more traditional feel to the game with its bunkering and large undulating greens. The elevation changes on the front nine are exhilarating and make you think on every shot.

An early morning game at Grand National in Opelika was next on the schedule. Lake Saugahatchee would come into play throughout our game on the Lake Course. Beautiful to look at, but always lurking to snatch golf balls sent flying just off line. Being one with nature could truly describe the feel that the landscape provides on the Lake Course. Apart from the majesty of native birds, the voices of fishermen hauling in their catch and of course golf balls cannonading off trees or splashing in the calm water, we found ourselves in a quiet place allowing us time to ponder our upcoming shots.

Four par threes ranging from 92-230 yards in length provide strength to the course and distress to golfers missing their tee shots. Since each border Lake Saugahatchee, beautiful sights abound causing visual distractions and that sense of doom to golfers fearful of losing their little white orb. For a golfer, there's nothing worse than watching a golf ball skipping on the surface before heading to a watery grave. But that's on the golfer. On the positive side, birdies and pars are there, just waiting for the right shot to reach the pristine putting surfaces. Chief among the par threes is the signature fifteenth hole where golfers tee off from elevated tees to an island green. After I two-putted for par, I threw my ball into the water to appease the water gods trusting they would spare fellow golfers following our group.

The Lake Course is a great play with holes playing near the water and also winding through stretches of woodland. I am left to think about a return to Grand National to play both the Links and Short Courses and possibly a return engagement on the Lake Course. Maybe the water gods will remember my donation. Or not.

The Ross Bridge Golf Course in Hoover is the newest addition to the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail and was our next destination. Roger Rulewich and Bobby Vaughn have drawn accolades for their design since it opened in 2005. The third longest course in the world at 8,191 yards from the tips, Ross Bridge is spread over 330 acres of rolling parkland in the Shannon Valley.



Renaissance Ross Bridge Resort

Your tour of Ross Bridge begins and ends with water in play. Two sizeable and intimidating man-made lakes come into play on ten holes and they are connected by a cascading waterfall whose waters drop 80 feet and separate the ninth and eighteenth greens. Along the way generous fairways wind their way through a landscape featuring relentless undulations whose hilltops offer spectacular wow-factor views.

Awaiting your tee or fairways shots are large and rolling bent-grass greens. There are no guarantees of birdies or even pars once your ball comes to rest on the greens. Take it from me that they are immaculate and fast, requiring a keen eye and gentle touch with your putting implement.

Although you will encounter many spectacular views during your round, my favourite is the panoramic view available from the ninth fairway. In addition to the wildlife present on the fairway and in the air on your way to your target green visible at the end of the lower lake, you can watch golfers playing the eighteenth fairway and green as well as those teeing off on the tenth hole and on the crest of the hill above the waterfall and gristmill those playing the fourth green.

Our last game before flying home was on the Valley Course at Oxmoor Valley in Hoover. In spite of a steady sprinkling of liquid sunshine, the beauty that is the Valley Course shone through as it traversed two miles of twists and turns along the narrow Shannon Valley in the Appalachians.

Elevated tees offer scenic views of what awaits you on each hole including woods, strategically placed bunkers and generous landing areas for our tee shots. That is unless you decide to bite off a little extra on your shots. Greenside, you will find ample bunkers to capture errant shots even though the greens are more than generous in size. Water in the form of ponds, streams and environmentally sensitive areas is present on over half the holes.

All too soon, it was time to leave the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail after a sampling of five pleasurable golf courses that are well worth playing over and over again.

But what about the rest of the Trail? A return trip is definitely warranted as there are still twenty-one golf courses to play and experience. From all accounts, there isn't much to choose between any one of them as their quality is just as good as those sampled on this trip.

In addition to Mr. Bronner's vision of a golf trail, he included a stay and play component which he very successfully accomplished by partnering with Marriot and Renaissance Hotels.

The Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, that spreads the length and breadth of the State of Alabama, has been copied by others but never duplicated or surpassed in terms of quality and public access.

Dr. Bronner's legacy will live on in the future.

FAIRWAY FACTS

Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail –
www.RTJGolf.com

Montgomery CVB
www.VisitingMontgomery.com

Auburn-Opelika Tourism
www.aotourism.com

Greater Birmingham CVB
www.inBirmingham.com

Alabama Tourism
www.Alabama.Travel

Auburn University
www.auburntigers.com

Dreamland BBQ
www.dreamlandbbq.com

Brick Oven Pizza
www.brickovenonline.com

Renaissance Hotel & Spa , Montgomery
www.marriott.com/montgomery

Renaissance Ross Bridge
 Golf Resort & Spa, Hoover
www.marriott.com/hoover

Hampton Inn & Suites, Opelika
www.hamptoninn.hilton.com

FarmLinks at Pursell Farms
www.FarmLinks.org

Honours Golf
www.HonoursGolf.com



Capitol Hill - Senator Course